

SOURCES OF PERCEPTIONS MILITARY SERVICE

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ABSTRACT

Data from the Youth Attitude Tracking Study (YATS) indicate that perceptions of military Service are dominated by word-of-mouth communications with others, particularly persons who are or have been in the military, and by the media--primarily movies. Each year, two out of five young men discuss military Service with relatives and acquaintances; more often than not, they discuss military Service with those who are or have been in the Armed Services. In addition, they report same-generation friends, most of whom have been in military Service, are a dominant source of impressions of the military, although many report older relatives and friends as sources of impressions. The role of influence is also evident in reasons youth give for entering, or not entering, military Service, and by reasons they give for increased/decreased interest in military Service. Veterans and military members are reported as having a net positive effect on interest in military Service, and most youth know someone -- either of their own generation or older -- who has been in military Service. Finally, evaluation of sources of perceptions, and influences on propensity, are both old and new-Vietnam movies and current events -- veterans of past wars and current military members.

There are several questions addressed by YATS that suggest people who are or have been in military Service have a significant impact on the propensity of young people for military Service:

- Some young men say their interest in military Service has increased or decreased; what reasons do they offer for the change?
- What reasons do young men offer for not entering military Service?
- Where do young men get their perceptions of military Service?
- With whom do youth discuss military Service, and are they encouraged to join or discouraged from joining?

We will discuss these questions, in turn.

Some young men say their interest in military Service has increased or decreased; what reasons do they offer for the change?

Half of the young men, selected randomly, were asked whether their interest in military Service had changed during the preceding year. Both those who said their interest had increased and those who said it had decreased were asked what changed their interest. We did not suggest reasons to them, but simply recorded their answers (as best we could). The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Reasons for Increased or Decreased Interest In Military Service

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Reason for Increase	Percent	Reason for Decrease	Percent
Life course		Life course	
Change in life/time to change	10	Going to school	17
Unsatisfactory circumstances	2	Employed	7
Increased obligations	1	Preferable circumstances	6
Getting older	6	Increased obligations	4
Scholastic frustration	2	More mature	1
Money		Other career plans	17
Money for college	22	Communications	
Money (college not mentioned)	6	World events	3
Employment		Recruiter contacts	1
Training	17	Talk w/ military	3
Employment	10	Talk w/ non-military	1
Unsatisfactory job	1	Military	
Communications		Negative experience	2
Recruiting advertising	3	Dislike military	9
World events	1	Downsizing	1
Recruiter contacts	6	Not qualified/failed test	3
Talk w/ military	11	Danger	2
Talk w/ non-military	2	Just not interested	8
Right thing to do		Base closings	0

Many young men cite changes in their life which affect their interest in military Service, but do not have a bearing on what the Services have to offer or their perceptions of the military (shown as "Life Course" in the table). Others mention benefits (money for college, job training) or disadvantages inherent in military Service (danger). Our focus here, however, is on reasons falling under the "Communications" category. Among those who said their interest had increased, 11 percent said discussions with persons who were, or had been, in military Service had increased their interest in military Service. Only half as many mentioned discussions with recruiters (6%), and fewer mentioned recruiting advertising (3%), or discussions with others who had never been in the military (2%). Discussions with current military members or veterans also account for decreased interest among some young men.

What reasons do young men offer for not entering military Service? Where do young men get their perceptions of military Service?

In YATS, we ask young men both for the main reasons they would enter the military and the main reason they would not enter the military. Reasons to join focus on benefits--money for college, job training, and so forth. The

most common reason not to join deals with the military lifestyle. Focus groups suggest many youth have a "boot camp" perception of military Service, and many young men believe military life is too "regimented" for their tastes. These perceptions of military life surely hinder the Services' ability to recruit top-quality personnel.

We asked youth where they get their perceptions of military life. As shown in Table 2, people who have served in the military play a major role. For example, 35 percent of the young men say they get perceptions of military Service from friends their own age, 83 percent of whom are or have been in military Service. It is noteworthy that perceptions are largely based on the military experience of a prior generation 20 percent of the young men mention their father, 14 percent an uncle, 8 percent a grandparent, and 19 percent an older friend (friends at least ten years older than the respondent). Collectively, people are much more frequently mentioned as a source of perceptions than the media (movies, television, literature, and advertisements). Moreover, comments we have heard in interviews suggest young men realize many current movies are not realistic portrayals of military life.

Table 2
Sources of Perceptions of the Military

Source	Youth Mentioning Source (percent)	Veteran Portion of Those Mentioned (percent)
Friend (peer)	35	83
Father	20	91
Older Friend	19	95
Other Relative	14	93
Uncle	14	98
Grandparent	8	97
Cousin	8	97
Brother	5	92
Mother	3	*
Educator	2	*
Coworker/boss	1	*
Movies/TV	34	n/a
Advertisements	10	n/a
Things Read	8	n/a

That young people considering military Service would turn to someone they know for information about the military makes sense. Movies are "make believe" and youth are skeptical of the information they get from the recruiting services. Moreover, most young men have access to persons they know who have been in the military. Last year, we asked all YATS respondents whether their parents, siblings, or any of their friends had been in the military. Moreover, we asked the veteran status of anyone with whom they had discussed military Service, or whom they referenced as a source of perceptions of military Service. Taken together, these data show at least 84 percent of young men know someone, friend or relative, who has been in the military. Thirty-nine percent said their father had been in the military, 62 percent said they had a friend their own age, and 36 percent mentioned a friend or relative of their parent's generation.

With whom do youth discuss military Service, and are they encouraged to join or discouraged from joining?

We ask YATS respondents whether, within the past year, they have discussed military Service with anyone other than a military recruiter. In the Fall, 1995, 38 percent of the 16-21 year-old men said that they had. As a follow-up question, we asked with whom they had discussed military Service. Table 3 shows the percent of young men who mentioned each of various types of "discussants" -- the persons with whom they had discussed military Service. Most frequently, youth discuss military Service with their parents and with friends.

Table 3

16-21 Year-Old Men Discussing Military Service by Relationship to Respondent

Relationship	Percent*	Relationship	Percent*
Friends (peers**)	19	Educator	3
Father	19	Girlfriend/boyfriend	3
Mother	18	Grandparent	2
Other Relative	7	Cousin	2
Brother	5	Other	2
Older Friends**	4	Sister	1
Spouse	3	Aunt	1
Uncle	3	Coworker/employer	1

*Each respondent may have had conversations with people in different relationships. Thus, the sum of the percentage exceed the percent of young men discussing military Service with anyone.

**Percentages are based on the whole population, not just those who had discussed military Service with anyone.

***We classified same-age friends as "peers;" those at least ten years older than the respondent were counted as "older."

It should be noted that very few young men report discussing military Service with educator -- teachers, counselors, or coaches. Other sources of information, such as focus groups, confirm that young men are not frequently seeking advice on military Service from educators. They may play a major role in affecting recruiter access to youth, but do not appear to have a large direct role in steering young men toward, or away from, military Service.

We also ask young men whether the people they talked to had been in the military and whether they thought these people encouraged or discouraged military Service. Table 4 shows the results for friends, were about as likely to take a neutral stance as to advocate military Service. On the other hand, those who had been in the Service were much more likely to favor military Service. Of the friends who were consulted, somewhat fewer than half had ever been in military Service, and about half of the fathers with whom youth had discussed military Service were veterans (or, possibly, current military members), but almost none of the mothers had been in the military. Mothers seem to be about as likely to favor as oppose military Service, and a third of them are described as neutral. Few friends and fathers, on the other hand, were perceived as opposed to military Service. Friends and fathers who had never served in the military were about as likely to take a neutral stance as to advocate military Service. On the other hand, those who had been in the Service were much more likely to favor military Service.

Analysis of YATS survey responses underscores the importance of youth contact with military members and veterans. Conversations with military members and veterans are cited prominently by youth as reasons for positive changes in enlistment propensity. It is also found that friends and fathers are more likely to endorse the decision to enlist in the military than oppose it. Mothers, however, were nearly as likely to oppose as favor enlistment.

Although impressions of military life are received from a broad variety of sources, some sources are considered more realistic than others. Movies, for example, while dramatic in the images they project, are not considered as true to life as the information received from a friend or family member.

Table 4

Endorsement of Military Service by Friends and Parents

Relationship/Military Experience	Oppose	Neutral	Favor	Total
Friend (peer)				
Military Service*	1.4	2.3	4.7	8.4
No Military Service	1.8	4.3	4.3	10.3
Father				
Military Service*	1.2	2.1	6.1	9.4
No Military Service	1.1	3.9	4.2	9.2
Mother				
Military Service*	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1
No Military Service	5.9	5.4	6.4	17.8

*The YATS questions did not distinguish between people are currently in the military and those who had been in the past. In this table, and elsewhere in the paper, we refer to current military members, as well as those who have served in the past, as "veterans."

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